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La revanche du soutien-gorge. Le corps des ouvrières de la lingerie (1968-2012)

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The revenge of the bra.* Seamstresses' bodies in the lingerie industry (1968-2012)

Fanny GALLOT

Over the course of the twentieth century, undergarments underwent something of a revolution, as they "are now flaunted, or can be divined at any rate, not for what they are, but for what they have to say about the political dimension of modern society".[1] Indeed, from the Belle Époque onwards, as bodies were gradually revealed,[2] feminists demanded an end to the corset or "at least its adaptation to the female body",[3] while hygienists condemned the malformations it caused.[4] Little by little, women replaced it with the bra [or brassiere, as it was originally known], recommended as early as 1908 by the couturier Paul Poiret, who, "in the name of freedom", designed clothes with a new silhouette inspired by the fashions of the "Merveilleuses" from France's Directoire period [the 1790s] – when dresses were cinched just below the bosom.[5] The adoption of the bra became more widespread between the two World Wars, and even though it compressed more than it supported, it was heralded as liberating.[6] After World War II, women went back to "their old habits of compression"[7] until 1968, when American feminists lashed

* Translator's note: the French term is *soutien-gorge*, literally "bosom support".

1 Duclert 1999.

2 Sohn 2006: 94.

3 Klejman & Rochefort 1989: 318.

4 Bard 2010: 19.

5 Bertherat & de Halleux 1996: 22.

6 *Ibid*.: 36.

7 *Ibid*.: 56.

out against the image of Miss America: their actions led to the term "bra-burners" being used to designate feminists.[8] As in the case of the so-called "first-wave" feminists, the body itself was implicated in this act: the idea was to liberate it from the yoke of the bra, deemed to be too oppressive. As an intimate item, the bra constitutes a center of tension between the political and the private, between domination and liberation, and between women as passive objects and active subjects. Having been a symbol of the oppression of women's bodies for American feminists in 1968, what did bras mean in the following years to the women workers who made them in France?

The bodies of female seamstresses and other garment workers in the lingerie industry from 1968 to 2012 constitute a heuristic object of observation allowing for several inter-connected levels of analysis that intertwine the timeframe of the factory with the seamstresses' own private timeframes. As both producers and potential consumers, these women stood at the intersection of two movements: on the one hand, their bodies-at-work deconstructed the product's intimate nature; on the other, they were confronted on a daily basis with the images conveyed by the company they worked for, and which they ended up assimilating. Their bodies were implicated in a historically particular way,[9] because the bras were both items that the women mass-produced and items that they wore. The idea is not, therefore, to produce historical knowledge *about* their bodies but *from* them, by carefully "bringing to light what transpired *through* them".[10]

Most of the seamstresses at Chantelle and Lejaby spent their entire career at one company. When the factories closed in the 1990s and 2000s, the women protested by drawing attention to what they had produced there. Their bodies, which had been shaped by decades of work, became visible on this occasion. It is this construction, specific to the lingerie industry, that I intend to examine, basing this study on various sources, including Chantelle's in-house magazines

8 Hanisch 2007.

9 Granger 2012: 7.

10 *Ibid.*: 10.

from the years 1984 to 1994, and oral sources.[11] I also had access to the private archives of one woman, who was a union organizer for the CGT at Lejaby, as well as to a great number of photos, which I examined alongside images from two films, *Rue des filles de Chantelle*, ("Chantelle Girls' Street") made by Véronique Ménard and Danièle Lefebvre during the seamstresses' protests in 1993 and 1994, and *Tous ensemble* ("All Together"), a 1998 made-for-TV drama by Bertrand Arthuys about seamstresses' protests in a lingerie factory called Epernelle.

After examining how women's bodies were used in Chantelle's communication campaigns, I will consider the way the women garment workers internalized those norms, in order to understand how the item they produced contributed to the display of the seamstresses' very bodies when the factories were shut down.

This article will concentrate on women garment-workers at the Chantelle factory in Saint Herblain, whom I will compare with women at two Lejaby factories (Rilleux-la-Pape and Bourg-en-Bresse),[12] in other words these were seamstresses producing fine lingerie that they could not afford to buy without the employee discounts offered by their firms. Chantelle is a mid-range to high-end lingerie company. Its roots go back to the nineteenth century, when François-Auguste Gamichon started producing elastic fabric and founded a company re-named Gamichon-Kretz when his nephew, Maurice Kretz, joined him. Inserting elastic into corsets contributed to Kretz's growth in the early twentieth century, but it was a new

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11 I met with five seamstresses and one manager from Chantelle, as well as one of the directors of the film *Rue des filles de Chantelle*, and two seamstresses from Lejaby (Rillieux-la-Pape and Bourg-en-Bresse).

12 In 1995, after the death of Maurice Bugnon, the problems started for the women, who began protest actions against the merger of the two companies as early as 1996. Finally, in 2003, the group announced 225 layoffs plus the closing of the sewing shops in Rillieux- la-Pape (Rhône), Firminy (Loire), Beynost (Ain) and Vienne (Isère). Then in 2010, more downsizing led to the closing of three out of the four plants. Eighty-eight jobs were eliminated in Bourg-en-Bresse (Ain), 46 in Bellegarde (Ain) and 63 in Le Teil (Ardèche), despite the takeover of the company's headquarters in Rillieux-la-Pape, in September 2010. The last working plant, in Yssingeaux, closed in January 2012.

girdle called Chantelle, launched in 1949, that brought fame to the company, and eventually became the firm's new name, in 1976.[13] Kretz enterprises moved to an industrial park in Saint Herblain in 1967. While some of the women worked at the cutting tables, the majority of the workforce was made up of skilled industrial seamstresses. The high point was reached in the mid-1970s, when the factory employed nearly 500 people (male and female). It then declined gradually until 1994, when the company decided to close the plant.

In 1930, Gabrielle Viannay founded the "Le Gaby" brand for bras she was making in Bellegarde-sur-Valserine. The business continued to grow after the founder's death, in 1954. It was bought out by the Bugnon brothers, who opened other plants, including the one in Bourg-en-Bresse. The brand name was changed to Lejaby, and the company, called Rasurel (later Euralis), was bought out.

The bodies of women garment-workers: valued by the company

After 1968, in the context of an economic crisis, production-organization methods in French factories underwent profound transformations,[14] accompanied by the birth of a "neo-paternalism" founded on "new managerial techniques for motivating staff". These included, in particular, a new culture within firms that aimed "to urge employees to identify with the company they work for, and to motivate them while avoiding excessive pay rises".[15]

For working men and women, this identification with the company could be based on what they produced – pride in "a well-crafted product"[16] – which different companies sought to reinforce in different ways, depending on the type of item produced. Among the tools used by Chantelle to forge a shared culture throughout the workforce, the company's in-house magazine played a key role. It offers historians an observation post for understanding both the implications and the themes of communication the company used. Although in-house newsletters and magazines date as far back as the late nineteenth

13 Bertherat & de Halleux 1996: 73.

14 Hatzfeld 2002; Beaud & Pialoux 2012.

15 Daumas 2010: 885.

16 Frémontier 1980: 81; Verret 1996: 33.

century, their numbers grew rapidly in the second half of the twentieth, especially post-1968. In-house newsletters fulfilled three main roles: informing, training and "reinforcing a sense of belonging or of identification."[17] *Information Chantelle* first appeared in 1984. The idea was that it would enhance employees' "sense of belonging", essentially by featuring the latest trends in lingerie, promoting, for instance, "beguiling bandeau bras that flaunt the beauty of your shoulders," a "strapless" model in order to satisfy customers looking for a bra that would be "invisible, with a smooth natural line, while providing some support".[18] In the early 1980s, shortly after feminists had called on women to "burn [their] bras",[19] lingerie firms needed to promote the image of women's "natural" shape. So Chantelle reinvented itself as the "liberating lingerie" that offered women a sense of "consummate and unabashed femininity," lingerie for women who were now active and independent, but still sexy.[20] Although Chantelle's in-house magazine was provided free of charge, not all of the women workers read it regularly.[21] They were, however, all aware of the brand's advertising campaigns,[22] if only through the advertising posters, which were highly visible on the shop floor. Being confronted on a daily basis with images that featured a certain type of female body, the women workers were led to reconsider their own bodies. Even though this high-end lingerie was intended for well-to-do women, the advertising campaigns focused on busy working women with whom the women on the shop floor could identify, all the more so in that they were asked to test the products.

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17 Malaval 2001: 11.

18 *Informations Chantelle*, 3, March 1984.

19 *Les dessous de Chantelle*, 4, January 1997.

20 Duclert 1999.

21 *Informations Chantelle*, 61, June 1995; only 100 employees (male and female) took part in this survey, and "in the factories, Épernay and Peronne came way out in front, with by far the most answers."

22 Images from the film *Rue des filles de Chantelle,* as well as photos of the protesting Lejaby workers, both show that the slogans and visuals from the brands' ad campaigns were often parodied during the protests, leading us to believe that they were known to the women who worked there.

Because the fact was that although they did not fall into the company's target market, women at Chantelle still lent their bodies to the cause, taking on the role of virtual consumers, and indeed, actual users of the products:

> There was someone who, when we brought out a new bra, would, well, grab one or the other of us, to give the bra a try-out, to see what flaws it might have, if it stayed in place well, or this or that… So there were these try-out sessions, they would take a few girls, and so, I would get picked to try out a bra or panties or a teddy or whatever. And it was a good deal, because they would ask you test-wear it, which meant that they gave it to you. They would give it to you, and afterwards they asked you to bring it back to see how it held up to getting washed a few times. Like, did it tear, did it lose its shape, and all that. But after that, it was yours. Knowing that Chantelle was, well still is, a very expensive brand. So, uh, when you don't have to pay for your underwear, it's great, really really great; that was about the only good part.[23]

Asking women on the shop floor to try the items out seems to have been common practice in the lingerie sector, because Lejaby used to do it too.[24] These comments – made in 2010 by Florence Benoit, a grass-roots CFDT union member, more than 15 years after the factory was closed – show that the women knew that they didn't match the brand's actual target market. While it is important to take the source into account, the idea that the free items and reductions granted to employees were seen in a very positive light has been corroborated by others, like Patricia Denis, a CFDT representative at Chantelle, who talks about the sales organized by the works council,

> They were actually items that couldn't be sold, so they would sell them to us for less. So back then, anything that was on sale we could buy for incredible bargain prices […] So you had the right to a certain number of sale items a year, as well as a certain number of new items. So for example, we got 50% off if we ordered from the catalogue. So we'd buy things for our whole family, our sisters, mothers… We got some great deals.[25]

So the reductions granted by the firm allowed not only the seamstresses themselves, but also women in their families, to become

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23 Interview with F.B., conducted on 7 January, 2010, in her home.

24 Interview with L.J., conducted on 5 November 2010, in Rillieux-la-Pape.

25 Interview with P.D., conducted on 6 January 2010, in a café.

consumers of their products. This was yet another way in which to instill company spirit and identification. You could say, after a fashion, that the seamstresses acted as spokeswomen for their companies to their families. Whether it was product-testing or price reductions for employees, these practices provided certain advantages to these blue-collar women, who couldn't have afforded to buy fancy lingerie at market rates.[26] The women saw these advantages as a form of workers' rights. So this type of recognition for garment workers involved their bodies – or those of the women close to them at home – and could be explained by the fact that they were crossing class barriers by wearing lingerie that didn't belong to women factory workers' normal consumer habits.[27] Finally, starting in the 1980s, the seamstresses' gendered bodies began to constitute one of the vectors for getting the women to identify with Chantelle. Whether they were drawn in by the company's advertising campaigns or solicited as potential consumers, these blue-collar women were transgressing class rules by wearing the brand's undergarments. But the seamstresses' gendered bodies did not only constitute real or imagined products of company culture and policies: they were also modified by them.

"They were real lookers":[28] assimilated standards?

In addition to Chantelle's discourse and practices, other historical processes implicated the bodies of the women working at the Saint Herblain factory between 1968 and 1994, allowing us to delve more deeply into how those bodies were fabricated. Annie Guyomarc'h, CGT union representative at the Saint Herblain Chantelle factory, points out that the industrial sector where women work affects their habits as consumers: "girls" who work in the garment industry pay a

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26 Interview with A.G., conducted on 17 February 2010, at the Centre d'Histoire du Travail ("Work History Center", CHT) in Nantes. The Lejaby women who took over the company's headquarters in Rillieux-la-Pape in September 2010, talk about this shift in *Les pieds sur terre*, Lejaby 1, broadcast on *France Culture* radio on 8 October 2010, "tendu comme un string " ("As Taut as a Thong".

27 Chessel 2012.

28 Interview with V.M., conducted on 9 January 2010 in her home.

lot of attention to their appearance, "whereas in other federations, it doesn't matter nearly as much." She adds that, for her, "your appearance, your hairstyle and how you dress matter."[29] The connection between industrial sector and the appearance of both the women and the men who work there has been established by Mathilde Dubesset and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel. They showed that "daily exposure" to ribbons and notions founded the reputation of the workers in that sector, who were said to be particularly careful about their appearance.[30] So it is possible to suppose that, faced on a daily basis with the items they produce, destined for the fashion market, women garment workers are in permanent contact with certain gender norms, and that this affects the way in which they themselves dress. This aspect is reinforced in the case of lingerie because of the female nudity that is integral to the product's advertising. So the seamstresses at Chantelle and Lejaby were exposed on a daily basis to fashion models' bodies, which conform to exacerbated versions of these norms. In addition, wearing a bra is an inherently gendered practice, in that bras are in contact with the skin of a highly intimate and sexualized part of the body: they touch and shape women's busts. So bras mold a part of the body that is the target of particular expectations. Women's breasts are supposed to distinguish their figures from men's chests; the bra, by molding women's breasts, plays an active part in creating this distinction. The bra enters into the game of seduction, all the more so if it is made visible. Therefore, in addition to shaping the bust and offering a certain comfort, the bra has to look pretty and be graced with other typically feminine attributes: delicacy, lightness, purity, softness, etc. The bra can thus become symbolic of femininity and of the bust's erotic power. In that sense, it is fetishized: acting as a metonym – since the bra incarnates the breasts it supports – the item of dress is invested with the erotic value of the body part, but also with a certain gendered role, since it can be personified and thus become a subject in itself through emotional transference. That is why working in the high-end lingerie sector puts the women in the factory face to face

29 Interview with A.G., conducted on 17 February 2010, at the CHT.

30 Dubesset & Zancarini-Fournel 1993: 137.

with discursive and practical signals having implications for their own bodies.

Indeed, the product's specificity may explain why several women at Chantelle resorted to plastic surgery, something that they talked about openly, even though the practice was only first becoming common in the late twentieth century.[31] Véronique Ménard, one of the directors of the documentary *Rue des filles de Chantelle,* which was shot in 1994 during the protests against the Saint Herblain factory being closed, describes her surprise, which was undiminished in 2010:

> I've never seen so many… talking with them, I've never seen so many girls who had had makeovers, like getting a nose job, or their breasts or ears re-done…[32]

These comments show that their breasts weren't the only parts of their bodies on which the women had plastic surgery performed: although their faces were not directly concerned with lingerie, they also had them transformed (operated on), indicating a certain familiarity with the idea at the factory. Nevertheless, Véronique Ménard remembers that most of the operations concerned the women's busts:

> […] covered by your health insurance… They were too busty, you see… Well, it was usually either too busty or not busty enough… You could say it was a work-related issue, because when you're sitting at the sewing machine, when you bump into… It's true, a big bust can get in your way… So that was one reason for... recalibrating…[33]

The comments show that operations on the bust could be justified by factory work. It is likely that the first women to resort to surgery did it for practical reasons rather than esthetic ones, and were therefore covered by their health insurance. Yet that explanation doesn't work for breast enlargement or cosmetic surgery to the face. While Annie Guyomarc'h confirms that "the girls would get their breasts done. […] Quite a few of them did that,"[34] she adds that, "some of them

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31 Ory 2006: 138.

32 Interview with V.M., conducted on 9 January 2010 in her home.

33 *Idem*.

34 Interview with A.G., conducted on 17 February 2010, at the CHT.

would get a tummy tuck too".[35] Still, not all women in the lingerie sector went in for plastic surgery. Women at the Lejaby factory in Yssingeaux didn't,[36] or rather, if they did have operations, they didn't discuss them openly the way the women at the Chantelle factory in Saint Herblain did. So other factors besides the industrial sector need to be taken into account to explain these differences. We could start by suggesting urban life as a factor: Saint Herblain is a suburb of the city of Nantes, while Yssingeaux is located in a much more rural environment. This disparity between the two locales is consistent with the women's social background and therefore with their culture and their relationship with consumerism.

What is undeniable is that between 1968 and 1994, the fact that they worked in the lingerie industry factored into the striking changes in the way the Chantelle factory workers' envisaged their bodies. While the firm's production and communication strategy contributed to shaping the women's bodies, their actual bodies-at-work, particularly their "nimble fingers",[37] tended to challenge the bra's intimate nature.

The product's intimacy challenged: bodies that count[38]

Most of the women who took part in the struggle to keep their factories open (Chantelle in 1993 and 1994 and Lejaby in 2010) were hired somewhere around 1968.[39] So they had had long careers at the factory, which affected their relationship with lingerie, reducing the

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35 *Idem*.

36 Interview with B., H., S. and R., conducted in the Lejaby factory in Yssingeaux on 14 February 2012.

37 « Nos doigts de fée, il faut qu'on les mette en valeur » ("We have to draw attention to our nimble fingers") a Lejaby worker declares in January 2012, AFP, « Arnaud Montebourg se drape du "soutien-gorge tricolore" ("Arnaud Montebourg dons a 'tricolor bra' with the Lejaby protesters") 20 January 2012.

38 Butler 2009.

39 Chantelle's records show that the workers' seniority rose over the years, and the Lejaby women point out that: "we all watched each other grow up, get married and have kids. Some of us are grandmas now," *Les pieds sur terre*, Lejaby 1, broadcast on France Culture radio on 8 October 2010, « tendu comme un string » ("Taut as a thong").

intimate – or sexual – nature of the product of their work. In other words, a process of de-fetishization of bras took place from 1968 until the factories closed. The incarnation of femininity that the bra represented in broader society, particularly in terms of the heterosexual male gaze,[40] tended to have less impact in their approach to the product, which was explained by their role in its production, their class role: so the women's *bodies-at-work* led them to see bras and panties as mass-produced items like any other. Because high-end lingerie has to incarnate ideal feminine qualities, it uses specific fabrics, like lace, and rounded shapes: two constraints that require great manual dexterity from the seamstresses. Although they are elements of sexual fetishism for the women who buy them, each of the bra's features becomes a skill qualification for the women who make them.

In the garment industry, seamstresses are in direct contact with the fabric they work on, with their sewing machines as the only go-between. With a low level of mechanization, sewing bras requires tremendous craftsmanship, particularly in high-end lingerie (Chantelle and Lejaby). Extra pride is specific to this type of production; the seamstresses point out, for example, that certain jobs, like cup assembly, are particularly tricky. The idea is to attach the cups to the center stay and join everything together while making sure both cups are at exactly the same height, the symmetry is perfect, and the center stay remains smooth, with all these intricate adjustments depending essentially on the seamstress's knack.[41] A woman from Lejaby emphasizes the fact that making bras is "meticulous" and that "every millimeter counts" – especially since making them involves "lots of different steps".[42] So the sexual division of labor led seamstresses to have a special relationship with the product of their labor, because the sector required significant skills and therefore input from the seamstresses, input that mechanization hadn't replaced. Until the early 2000s, the situation in high-end lingerie was comparable to the

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40 Neret 2003: 7.

41 Interview with B., H., S. and R., conducted in the Lejaby factory in Yssingeaux on 14 February 2012.

42 Interview with L.J. and M.-C. R., CGT members, conducted on 5 November 2010, at the Lejaby factory in Bourg-en-Bresse.

one that has been described in the late nineteenth-century luxury woolen-fabric industry in the city of Elbeuf: mechanization had not replaced craftsmanship. The pride generated by this preserved know-how reinforced the seamstresses' attachment to the product, to the company and to their work.[43] Eventually, the product's intimate nature pales in comparison with the craftsmanship required to make it: the seamstresses' bodies-at-work, in this case their hands, de-fetishize the product. That is why the women had no qualms about flourishing the bras atypically during their protest actions: during demonstrations, bras were sometimes strung on lines between banners,[44] and or the women wore the lingerie over their clothes.[45] They even produced a giant bra-and-panty set,[46] reconnecting with the carnival-like atmosphere of the *charivari* that accompanied nineteenth-century women's strikes.[47] Nevertheless, the product's intimate nature persisted, due to the single-sex situation on the shop floor. When the women were hired (circa 1968), their supposedly innate feminine skills were used to justify that situation: male elements were totally excluded.

So the seamstresses' *bodies-at-work*, their positions in the sexual division of labor, created an incomplete defetishization, because a gender criterion subsisted in the hiring practices. In fact, while textile workers' pride is tied to the quality of the fabric and the craftsmanship of "those who design it and make it,"[48] high-end lingerie seamstresses' pride is all the greater in that they make an intimate, feminine item: an undergarment that is invisible, that hugs the body and – except in the sphere of intimacy – is untouchable for everyone else. Gilles Laurent, director of the Chantelle factories in Lorient and Epernay in 2011, remembers his early days:

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43 Daumas 1993: 221.

44 Interview with A.G. conducted on 17 February 2010, at the CHT; photograph of Chantelle workers demonstrating, 1994, CHT.

45 Photograph of Lejaby workers demonstrating, 2010, source: www.voixdelain.fr.

46 Photograph of Lejaby workers demonstrating, 2010, source: www.libelyon.fr.

47 Perrot 1974: 318-330.

48 Lafaye 2005: 703-713.

> The first time, I still remember, the first time I was walking through the factory with a package of bras in my hand, or on my shoulder… or wherever. The point is, it was an odd thing for a man, a young man, back in '80.[49]

He adds that when he tells people he works in the lingerie industry:

> You can definitely dine out on it. You always get a laugh when you say what your job is: "Do you get to watch the fitting sessions?" Actually, no, I never saw a single fitting session. Not even as director of the factory, in fact especially as director, I never saw a single one.[50]

These comments show that because of the sexual division of labor at the factory, supervisors – here the male executives – were excluded from certain activities on account of the type of product being made: its intimate nature and exclusively feminine clientele created a specific relationship between the workforce – particularly the seamstresses, who were manual workers – and the items they produced. Despite their subordinate position in the company, as women they had a certain exclusivity in their relationship to the product. Therefore, although it was de-fetishized in terms of class, lingerie was still a fetish in terms of gender. Nevertheless, the gender norms associated with what lingerie conveys were eventually upended by class relations when the seamstresses began protesting against factory closures.

In July 1996, for instance, Lejaby seamstresses decided to organize a fashion show "unveiling the latest [and last] models from the collection".[51] in front of the town hall in Bourg-en-Bresse. They repeated the parades in Bellegarde-sur-Valserine and Beynost (Ain) and Firminy (Loire), where some women employees and their daughters demonstrated in underwear or bathing suits: "the kind of demonstration we'd like to see more often," as one (male) journalist put it. The idea even appears in Bertrand Arthuys' TV movie *Tous ensemble,* which ends with seamstresses from Epernelle parading.[52] Marie-Christine Rochon explains the idea in these terms: "We wanted

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49 Interview with G.L., conducted on 15 September 2011, in Lorient.

50 *Idem*.

51 Lise Jalabert's private archives, press clipping *[s.n.]*, 14 juillet 1996.

52 INA Archives, *Tous ensemble*, by Bertrand Arthuys, was screened on France 2 on 18 November 1998.

to attract people's attention to the quality of French-made garments."[53] Lejaby had just been bought out by Warnaco, so the seamstresses wanted to make "Made in France' quality – as opposed to foreign production – visible. It was an interesting form of protest because it took the idea of a fashion show and enrolled it in a confrontational perspective. In the film, the seamstresses' bodies are important. They agreed to expose their own intimacy by modeling undergarments – thereby turning them into symbols of protest – and at the same time, they distanced themselves from the gender taboo that says that undergarments should remain invisible. Here, the women's agency was exerted both in the act of appropriation and in the subversion of gender roles: on the one hand, as women, they were following the injunction to wear undergarments by appropriating the habits of the lingerie industry (i.e. fashion shows), while on the other, they deconstructed the norms by modeling, even though they were factory workers, not fashion models; something which would, in Judith Butler's terms, constitute a performance.[54] So they introduced into a public space bodies that were usually unseen: bodies that work, bodies of women who can't afford the time or the money for beauty treatments[55] or fitness. The implication of these "working-class" bodies also contributed to the very deep subversion of class roles: the seamstresses took over production and promoted the products without the bosses, but they also introduced new forms of class struggle, light years away from classic agonistic ones. In this way, they deconstructed class roles on two levels: class in itself (*en-soi*), which would have them take orders from above; and class for itself (*pour-soi*), because they were inventing an innovative and unprecedented form of class-struggle protest, diametrically opposed to the belligerent image that the words *class struggle* usually convey. At that point, the collective agency they exerted – and which could be

53 Lise Jalabert's private archives, press clipping *[s.n.]*, 14 July, 1996.

54 Butler 2005: 261.

55 It should be pointed out that these were Lejaby women and not women from Chantelle, whose use of plastic surgery has been described. Despite the fact that the Chantelle women's concern for their appearance, and the efforts they employed therein, were far greater – or perhaps precisely because of those factors – they never considered taking on the role of models.

seen in the way they linked their own bodies to the product – was based on the categories of both class and gender, which modified each other: the women workers were operating within gender norms obliging them to wear certain undergarments, which reconfigured their class role; in return, this modified the gender norm, which associated fashion shows with modeling. In addition, by re-appropriating the product, they created a break with the way it was usually used. It took on a whole new meaning, becoming visible when it was supposed to stay outside of the public sphere. While it was still a fetish, in that it gave the women's demonstration unique meaning ("the kind we'd like to see more often"), it was no longer a reiteration of the inaccessible norm conveyed by fashion models' perfect bodies. Finally, more than just a de-fetishization, the seamstresses' bodies brought new content to the bra as object, and by extension, to the body it personified. This resignification of the product can be integrated into a more global resignification of the company's discourse about quality, a discourse that was turned against management, and furthermore accompanied by the seamstresses choosing to distance themselves from overseas production.

The end of French bodies at work?

The lingerie seamstresses' bodies were therefore implicated in a range of different ways between 1968 and 2012. Seen through the prism of the bra, the product of these women's work, a vision of history that starts with the body lets us understand the effects produced by the metamorphoses of paternalism when faced with the re-composition of global production leading to the closure of French factories. The women brought their product out of the sphere of intimacy. By wearing lingerie *over* their clothes, they shattered a certain image that the companies wanted to give of their products. The women flaunted a product that is normally dissimulated, exposing and attributing value to its production – and therefore to their own labor – whereas the bosses wanted to render the women invisible by closing the factories. In September 2010, Lejaby seamstresses occupied the company's headquarters in Rillieux-la-Pape to protest against 197 planned layoffs. The women explained to the media that their

connection to the product was "visceral." When I questioned them about the fact that the media photographed and filmed them with their products quite a bit, the women themselves referred to their "attachment",[56] like Lise Jalabert, a CGT member at Rillieux-la-Pape:

> Lise: […] Somebody said to me one day, "You have to admit you're lucky to work in undergarments. At least you get to see the finished product, you get to hold a good-looking item." And back then I answered, "Yeah, I suppose, but… it's no big deal!" I really didn't see it as lucky… But it's true that, when you've been there a long time, and you've seen how the company has evolved, the products have evolved, and you go into a lingerie shop, you just can't help checking if they have any Lejaby, and which Lejaby. And when you walk by a store with Lejaby in the window, you think: "That's our work in that window'." Knowing that only 30% of Lejaby is made in France… We do have an attachment"…[57]

Lise Jalabert's comments reveal that the attachment grew gradually, and that the generation of seamstresses who didn't care all that much about the product of their work in the late 1960s cared a lot more by the time the factories started to close. At the same time, a limit is indicated here, because the seamstress specifies that "*only* 30% of Lejaby is made in France." Which is why, when they boast about the high-end aspect of their production, they are hightlighting their own craftsmanship, their French bodies-at-work, producing the quality for which the brand is known. Taking the same approach as the one described by Monique Jeudy-Ballini in reference to workers (both male and female) in a luxury leather-goods company, the protesting seamstresses' discourse comes down on the side of "good", of quality production, while management's is located, not so much here on the side of "fast", but of "less expensive" production.[58] In this instance, they are defending French industry, as opposed to "overseas", "foreign" or "Asian" production.[59] By placing themselves within the French tradition of

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56 Interview with Lise Jalabert and Marie-Christine Rochon, CGT members at Lejaby, conducted on 5 November 2010, at the Lejaby factory in Bourg-en-Bresse

57 *Idem*.

58 Jeudy-Ballini 2002.

59 Interview with L.J. and M.-C. R. conducted on 5 November 2010, at the Lejaby factory in Bourg-en-Bresse.

luxury,[60] which was so important in knitted goods in the first half of the twentieth century[61], the "quality" they mention refers to French seamstresses' craftsmanship. The same reasoning can be seen in the Lejaby Yssingeaux seamstresses' protest when, in January 2012, they produced a tricolor bra in the colors of the French flag, inspired by the context of the French presidential election campaign.

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60 Marseille 2000: 7.

61 Chenut 2010: 333.

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